

Affinity Group Letter



On behalf of the People of Color Affinity Group, Early Career Professionals Affinity Group, LGBTQIA++ Affinity Group, Women's Employee Resource Group, and the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (ED&I) Working Group

Dear David Yarnold and Executive Team,

Over the past few years, issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion have risen to the fore of the National Audubon Society for the first time in its century-old lineage. First, there was the creation of the organization's first-ever Vice President for ED&I position, the **pioneering of "community science," and creation of the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (ED&I) Working Group at its foundational meetings at Hog Island.** We have seen the formation of employee groups representing people of color, LGBTQIA++ individuals, women, and early career professionals. The worth and consequence of building a diverse, inclusive, and equitable conservation movement has been highlighted at the biennial conventions and elevated in Audubon's brand and marketing.

These steps have been meaningful, but not sufficient. We invite you to join us to together build an Audubon that better serves its staff, members, the broader conservation movement, and, of course, the birds that bind us all.

This letter is written on behalf of the People of Color Affinity Group, Early Career Professionals Affinity Group, LGBTQIA++ Affinity Group, Women's Employee Resource Group, and the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (ED&I) Working Group to strengthen our workplace. We represent **236 employees at all levels of the National Audubon Society**, from those working on the ground at states and centers, to staff closest to organizational decision-making HQ. Our identities and experiences reflect the many underrepresented groups Audubon seeks to engage, hire, and influence. Together we are processing our disappointment with recent events starting with the abrupt departure of Deeohn Ferris, Audubon's former VP of ED&I, the subsequent ED&I all-staff webinar, and dismissive communication surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. The concerns raised by staff around these events and the recent ED&I Culture and Values Survey make it clear that **Audubon's culture and work process requires deep transformational change.** We are writing because Audubon is not living its expressed values. Collectively, we can and should do better.

Audubon's current leadership and workplace culture do not effectively enable meaningful ED&I practices and projects uniformly across the organization. Because the mandate to develop goals and projects around **ED&I lacks consistent strategic objectives and support from the top**, staff are left to make their own way or are allowed to ignore the work entirely. There will always be ED&I success at Audubon because some ED&I-dedicated staff believe in the work. However, this results in an **unequitable burden on women, people of color, and others of subordinated identities** who are willing to persist in a system that does not provide consistent or adequate training, resources, transparency, or strategy for a robust ED&I initiative.

"When Audubon let go Deeohn Ferris without real explanation; this sends a signal to all the people in Audubon (especially POC) that Audubon is not truly invested in EDI&J, that they are not going to be transparent about this.... why should I trust Audubon myself?"

"I was appalled on the all staff call this week to hear interns are getting laid off BEFORE any cuts to executive pay for example, due to COVID crisis. These people are our diversity pipeline."

"Audubon rewards silence and assimilation, which does not allow for the full potential of a true ED&I work culture to grow and develop. In a more specific way, white leadership needs to better practice allyship [sic] and being accomplices while expecting the same from all white managers."

"Audubon cannot rely on staff with personal commitment to this work to be unpaid change agents from within."

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From our recent Culture and Values Survey (121 respondents composed of 39% national staff, 53% state staff, and 8% both), **only 28% of the respondents felt their lived experiences at Audubon align with the values and concepts discussed on the ED&I Webinar, and 66% of respondents felt Audubon doesn’t create an environment where diverse staff can thrive.** Nearly half (47%) felt they had been asked to teach or lead ED&I without adequate resources, compensation, training or long-term support, while 40% have had members of their team and/or direct leadership stall, de-prioritize or ignore ED&I efforts. These grassroots, employee-driven survey results are representative of a larger issue at Audubon: an unacceptable power dynamic, commonly reinforced by the actions of our leadership on the Executive Team due to minimal representation and prioritization at the senior levels.

Responses in the Culture and Values Survey consistently highlighted three themes: ED&I Integration, Human Resources (HR), and Culture and Values. We look forward to leadership addressing these pressing issues on the next **ED&I All-Staff Call in mid-April.**

ED&I Integration

For successful ED&I integration, Audubon must:

1. Adequately structure and resource the next iteration of the ED&I team and leadership;
2. Embed ED&I throughout all national and state strategy and operational functions, including a pivot to environmental justice;
3. Develop an ED&I committee on the national board, and commit to board and executive team demographics reflective of the United States population; and
4. Commit to developing robust ED&I training for all staff (senior and executive staff, in particular) and provide recommended resources for chapters.

Human Resources

For staff to feel sufficiently supported, HR must:

1. Develop an HR team proportional to the size of staff, committed to diverse recruitment practices and a robust onboarding program;
2. Provide pay equity and salary transparency through the use of pay bands/grades, with geographically-adjusted salaries, and living wages for interns;
3. Develop educational and professional development opportunities with concrete professional development pathways; and
4. Collaborate with employees on benefit and leave design.

“I have been a member of the ED&I working group since the original cohort, and I have seen a change in attitude but not an acceptance of what it means to really do this work.”

“Audubon is a bowerbird, chasing the shiny and the new, while neglecting their older employees, thus causing an incredibly high turnover rate indicative of widespread employee dissatisfaction.”

“Right now, when issues are raised it becomes a battle with HR, whose goal is clearly to protect the company and not the employees who are voicing concerns. This leads to driving these employees away.”

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Culture and Values

In order for Audubon to honor the values it espouses, the organization must:

1. Create a democratic, equitable, and inclusive decision-making process for our public policy platform;
2. Develop and resource consistent and clear ED&I goals for national, state, and chapter initiatives. Ensure that state leadership support staff advancing or advocating for ED&I culture and projects locally;
3. Create consistent metrics for success to be applied throughout the organization that align with our values; and
4. Establish a transparent and anonymous process for employees to report and resolve issues in a manner that protects staff from retaliation.

Our survey results called attention to many concerns that we addressed above, but one theme that echoed throughout open-ended responses was unchecked sexism and gender-based discrimination. Women and gender-nonconforming employees reported experiencing retaliation for speaking out against wage inequity, mistreatment, and sexual comments and propositions. **Marginalized employees are not being protected by Audubon**, and our results clearly show the problem is institutional and widespread. We cannot do good work unless the most vulnerable among us are protected and thriving. Employees at Audubon demand equitable pay, respect, and a clear path for recourse.

It is time for Audubon to live its expressed values. Collectively, we can do better. The entirety of the Executive Team needs to be held fully accountable for the concrete actions needed to meaningfully advance ED&I at Audubon. By instituting top-down change, leadership has the opportunity to set an example. We, the collective Affinity Groups, WERG, and ED&I Working Group, request that David Yarnold and the rest of the Executive Team respond to these questions with transparent, clear, and actionable frameworks to address these issues on the next all-staff ED&I webinar in mid-April 2020.

Through education and advocacy, we make a great impact on conservation and public policy. Our organization's mission, our colleagues, and our love of birds are what call us to duty each day. We could make an even greater impact if we authentically honor the values we espouse. We look forward to working together with you and the rest of the Executive Team on creating a greater One Audubon for all.

Co-signed,

People of Color Affinity Group

Early Career Professionals Affinity Group

LGBTQIA++ Affinity Group

Women's Employee Resource Group

Equity Diversity and Inclusion Working Group

“We get the impression that no one in HQ likes each other, and are primarily set up to compete with or score points against each other. It is a very white male dominated and is demoralizing when you realize that you have to find a white male to make your same points if you want them to be heard or adopted. It feels like women are the workhorses and creativity in this organization and what they are able to accomplish is often despite the "direction" and whims of the white cisgender men at the top.”